

Appendix

Sodomy and the Academy

The Assault on the Family and Morality by “Liberation” Ethics

In a recent article (“Our Listless Universities,” *National Review*, December 10, 1982), Allan Bloom has given us a brilliant Theophrastian “character” of the life and thought now dominant in the American academy. “I begin with my conclusion,” he writes,

students in our best universities do not believe anything, and those universities are doing nothing about it, nor can they.

“Doing nothing” is something of a play on words, since it is nihilism that the universities “do.” Professor Bloom concedes that his initial “nothing” is indeed “something,” when he says that

The heads of the young are stuffed with a jargon derived from the despair of European thinkers, gaily repackaged for American consumption, and presented as the foundation of pluralism. . . . The new soul’s language consists in terms like value, ideology, self, commitment, identity—every word derived from recent German philosophy, and each carrying a heavy baggage of dubious theoretical interpretation of which its users are blissfully unaware. They take such language to be as unproblematic and immediate as night and day. It now constitutes our peculiar common sense.

Some time ago an article was published that might very well have formed the text for Professor Bloom’s critique. It appeared in *Current*, which calls itself “The Public Affairs Magazine of Claremont McKenna College,” and was written by Professor Steven Smith, my colleague in the Philosophy Department. It was a description by Professor Smith of his very popular course, “Theories of the Good Life,” which the editors of *Current* proudly presented as the College’s cultural complement to its acknowledged excellence in business economics.

Current went out of its way to draw attention to Professor Smith’s article by illustrating the magazine’s cover with a Daumier-like cartoon of a character called “Mr. Goodlyfe.” Mr. Goodlyfe was praised as representing what the editors said they liked to think of as “the guiding principle” of a CMC education. I wrote an essay about the cartoon and Smith’s article about his

course, entitled "Looking at Mr. Goodlyfe." This *Current* refused to publish, but it may be found above in the present volume. The only point that need be repeated here from my previous criticism of Professor Smith is that he himself had declared that he had no idea (that he knew nothing) of what the good life was. He had abandoned any attempt to discover anything about it by reading great books which ostensibly bore upon the question of the good life, e.g., books like the Bible, or books by such authors as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hegel, Marx, Mill, or Dewey. Studying philosophic books had, he said, only led him into a deep "personal crisis" from which he had emerged to tell his students that they must make up their own minds as to what kinds of lives they ought to lead. He was there to "facilitate" their thinking, but he could say nothing at all as to what they ought to think.

In the new *Current* (Winter/Spring 1983), Professor Smith returns to his theme in his "Reflections on Human Liberation." Although Professor Smith insisted that he did *not* know what the good life was, he is extremely confident in his declarations about human liberation. Here we have a text-book version of that nihilism, derived from recent German philosophy, "gaily repackaged for American consumption," of which Professor Bloom wrote. Here we can see exactly what it is with which the heads of the young are being "stuffed" in "our best universities." Professor Smith's article is instructive, not because it has any significance, either of originality or profundity—since it does not—but because it is so typical of what is being said in so many classrooms.

For Professor Smith, "human liberation" is something of a misnomer. The liberation of which he speaks relates to a "self" or to "selves" which are not identifiably human. Their "genders" appear not to actually belong to them: They are labels affixed by society. The reality of actual human beings, for most of us, however, begins with those we call our mothers and fathers. But "male" and "female" do not appear to be distinctions of nature, or of genuine reality, to Professor Smith. They are instead "roles" which are "stereotyped" by society, and by "social pressure." Human liberation—better called "self" or "selves" liberation—becomes above all emancipation from those stereotyped roles. Human nature, for those of us who believe what our eyes tell us, is partitioned into men and women. Moreover, the differences between men and women are the differences which instruct us in the reality of the whole of nature. For "nature" refers primarily to all those things that have their being by generation and growth. The "natural" things are distinguished from the "artificial" things, the things that are "made" but do not "grow." We human beings are "makers" of things, and we cause our world to be filled with artifacts, some of them wonderful indeed. But we ourselves are not artifacts. We—each of us—grow from fertilized seeds or eggs, whose life is not from any human maker. Man the maker is not the maker of man, because he is not the maker of nature. He has a nature, and he is part of nature. It is the *eros* acting in and through the generation of natural things by which all living things, including human things,

are endowed with vitality. The forms of human life, including the forms of human art, derive their vitality from the vitality that is in nature.

In nature, the distinction between male and female is the most fundamental of all distinctions. It is more fundamental than the distinction between man and beast, more fundamental even than the distinction between man and God. This is because human nature comes to sight as part of nature. And nature comes to sight as the *eros* subsisting in the distinction or partition within the whole of nature, which is grounded in maleness and femaleness. The radical European thought alluded to by Professor Bloom is nihilistic. It denies that we have any genuine knowledge of the external world. It begins with the observation that we have access to that world—if it can be said to exist at all—only by sense perception. Sense perception, however, takes place only internally within us. What we call “sight” refers to images that are confined within the brain. And the brain has no way of “verifying” the character of those images. There is, so to speak, no “on sight inspection” possible, that will confirm or correct the judgment made by the senses of the objects ostensibly sensed. Nihilism begins in the denial of any ground for faith in the reality of sense perception. Nihilism declares that all we can do is to frame hypotheses about a world that is permanently hypothetical. And we can frame these hypotheses, not for the sake of knowledge—which is impossible—but for the sake of power. “Knowledge” becomes the ground and cause of power. It does not consist—as the older view maintained—in comparisons of assertions made about reality with reality itself. Hence traditional morality is an illusion, or delusion, since it is an opinion, or a class of opinions, predicated upon there being a particular class of beings—human beings—among all the beings, with respect to whom norms of conduct are affirmed. A theoretical or contemplative account of the world underlies, and is presupposed by, the moral prescriptions as to how we should act in the world. Nihilism, however, sees moral prescriptions and commandments merely as manifestations of the will, a will that imposes or is imposed upon. Nihilism is essentially non-erotic, because in denying nature it denies the reality that is at the heart of nature, *eros*. Nihilism is moreover non-philosophic, or anti-philosophic. Philosophy means love of wisdom, but the wisdom with which philosophy is concerned, the wisdom for which the philosopher is erotically striving, is wisdom with respect to nature. Nihilism, denying nature, must deny philosophy as well. “Selves” then are not *a priori* human and hence are not *a priori* sons, fathers, brothers, or daughters, mothers, sisters. For the very words, fathers and sons, imply beings bound to each other by duties, by moral bonds, that the nihilist (or liberationist) cannot recognize. Man as a class of beings does not correspond to any idea of man, because there are no ideas, properly so called. There are only unconfirmed impressions. Individual consciousness is only the reaction within ourselves of the domination or subjection that results from collisions that occur in a metaphysical void or abyss. This is the perspective of liberation ethics. In the

traditional morality of western man, it was taught that man was made in the image of God ("male and female created he them") and that he imitated the divine goodness by obeying the divine commandments. Alternatively, it was taught that man was endowed with reason by nature and that, by the right use of reason, he might find out the rules of conduct befitting his nature. In discovering these rules, man would understand why it was good to obey them, and to internalize them. Liberation ethics, as we shall see, places great store by spontaneity. But such spontaneity has nothing in common with that habit of acting well that we call "good character."

Professor Smith is an apostle of freedom, but it is altogether "freedom from." It is altogether different from that unalienable right to liberty esteemed in our Declaration of Independence. For that was based upon a "decent respect to the opinions of mankind." These in turn were based upon "the laws of nature and of nature's God," which elicit no respect from Professor Smith. The laws of nature are in his view grounded in "gender stereotypes," the source of what he finds to be "the most insidious of all forms of tyranny." Taxation without representation is utterly remote from the question of freedom uppermost in his consciousness. Taxation concerns property, property the family, and the family, the morality of genders, which he calls "tyranny." Freedom, for Smith, means not to be held back, or averted from any desired outcome. This means that in the most fundamental respect, Smith is an anarchist. No restraint can be justified intrinsically. Any restraint that is "appropriate" is prudential rather than moral. Certain things "ought not" to be done, from Smith's point of view, only because they get you into trouble, not because they are wrong. Whether he will admit it or not, Smith's argument is an argument for despotism, because the only way in which one can maximize one's desired outcomes is to be more powerful than any of the other selves with whom—or which—one's own self might come into collision. One cannot, within the framework of liberation ethics, distinguish freedom from license, or even attribute to freedom itself anything properly called "goodness." Absence of restraint is desirable, not because it is good, but because it is desired. This tautology may be—indeed it is—absurd. But the nihilist universe is absurd, and the liberation ethicist glories in this absurdity. And so he will speak glowingly—even eloquently—about the terrors of oppression, and of the bright sunlit uplands of liberation, without regard to how base, or even disgusting, the liberated self may be.

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Here is how Smith begins what he calls "a brief excursus into philosophy," for which he himself claims "no originality or novelty."

The root notion of freedom is, I believe, the spontaneous, uninhibited expression of the integrated self. Such a notion presumes that there is a self, as more than

simply a conduit for external forces funneling unaltered through the organism. Such a notion implies agency: the self is naturally active, creative, productive, seeking to engage the world rather than passively reacting.

It is difficult to see what the word “integrated” adds to the word “self” in the first sentence quoted above. Certainly Smith’s use of “integrated” is not to be understood in a sense opposed either to “disintegrated” or to “segregated.” More important, it has nothing to do with the word “integrity,” which refers to the goodness of moral character. A man of integrity is one who can be relied upon, something that can hardly be said of someone who is notable primarily for being “spontaneous” and “uninhibited.” Someone of good moral character is not liberated from the moral law: on the contrary, he is bound by it. Being bound by morality—in particular being bound by the obligations pertaining to “gender stereotypes”—is something Smith identifies with oppression.

But what in the world is a “self”? Smith’s vocabulary appears to be derived from Kant. By saying that the self is not merely a conduit for external forces, Smith is claiming for it the status of a *noumenon* as distinct from a *phenomenon*: that is to say, it has *freedom* as distinct from being a subject of *determinism*. Freedom, for Kant, meant the ability of a rational being to obey a law that it has given to itself. The categorical imperative, according to Kant, is the form of the will of a rational being. It commands us to act so that the maxim of our will may become a universal law. Liberation ethics, however, would emancipate us from the “social pressures” of “gender stereotypes.” The maxim of the will endorsed by Smith with the greatest emphasis is one that would resist the social pressures which engender “homophobia,” or fear of homosexuality. By the Kantian formula, one would have to ask, could the maxim of becoming homosexual become a universal law? The answer, of course, is that it could not, without the human race becoming extinct in one generation. This, it seems to me, is something that Kant would hold contradicts the idea of a good will. Smith’s claim of freedom for the self is then not Kantian.

Smith does however say that “the self is naturally active, creative, productive.” But he gives no substantive meaning to activity, creativity, or productivity. All he can say about what a self does is that it “engages the world,” instead of “passively reacting.” But what in the world does a free “self” do—or what is it like—when it is actively engaged? At the end of his article, Smith celebrates the consummation of “human liberation” by saying that it means “simply becoming who we are: free to be . . . you and me.” (The hiatus between “be” and “you” is Smith’s.) Smith collapses the distinction between “being” and “becoming.” Because nothing genuinely “is,” nothing is prevented from “becoming” anything else. Once one has abandoned the concept of gender, then nothing can be properly said to be engendered, and there is no directedness in becoming. Becoming has taken on an entirely new meaning. In nature, being and becoming are terms correlated with male and female. In a

pre-nihilist universe, it would make no sense to speak of an acorn—or anything else that grows—“becoming what it is.” An acorn is an acorn: but for an acorn to “become” something, is for it to become a sapling and an oak tree. Without the distinction between potentiality and actuality, correlated with male and female, freedom can mean anything—or nothing—and can mean both anything and nothing simultaneously! “What is human liberation?” Smith asks finally. “My answer,” he replies, “is unformed, open, almost empty....” In fact, it is empty. In the context of his primary concern, “in the context of sexism,” says Smith, “human liberation means the removal of impediments based simply on sex or gender....” But selves, we remind ourselves, are according to Smith beings whose consciousness has been engendered by their “engagement” with the world. And this engagement, it seems, is nothing but the engagement with impediments. Without the impediments, there would be no engagement; without engagement, no consciousness. The end of engagement is the end of life. Liberation means death.

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Smith continues his “excursus into philosophy” as follows.

The absence of freedom means, therefore, the presence of blocks or limitations that prevent unfettered expressions of the self. In the first instance such blocks are purely external: “I tried to go through the doorway, but he stood in the way”; “I wanted some food, but there was none in the house.” This form of unfreedom ... may be called objective constraint.

We see that a man standing in a doorway preventing us from going through it is called an “objective constraint.” But there is no such thing as an abstract man standing in an abstract doorway. An actual man in an actual doorway may be a fireman, keeping real people from a burning and collapsing building. Or it may be someone from the bomb squad, keeping others out until the bomb discovered within has been defused or removed to a safe place for detonation. Smith’s “self,” without a gender, is also without a motive. As to the food that is wanted: we may ask, why was there no food in the house? Is the cause poverty? Or is Smith on a diet, and the house was emptied of food to help him stay on his diet? Or perhaps there was a power failure, and the food in the refrigerator was removed to a place where it could be kept from spoiling? Clearly, we cannot characterize hypothetical constraints as actual—or objective—constraints without knowing the motives and circumstances of the agents.

Smith’s “second form of unfreedom” arises, he says,

not from outright blocks or impediments, but from threat. Because we seek to avoid certain outcomes that we find aversive, the prospect of an aversive outcome

is felt as a constraint: "I didn't want to give him the money, but he had a gun"; "I was afraid she'd scream at me if I went home, so I stayed with a friend." This form of unfreedom, in which an actual threat causes me to act differently than I would otherwise prefer to act, is more or less captured by the term intimidation.

Anything that causes me to act differently from the way I would “prefer to act” is, according to Smith, simply and categorically a form of “unfreedom,” however base or foolish my preference may be. Concerning preferences, “non est disputandum,” says Mr. Goodlyfe. But let us look again at Mr. Smith’s examples. Here we see that one man’s desired outcome is another man’s “aversive outcome.” Does not the man behind the gun get what he wants? And why should he not? Perhaps he is a policeman, and the money in Smith’s possession has just been stolen from a bank. And who is the woman who would scream at Smith? What in the world has he done to make her want to scream at him?

Clearly, it is not possible to speak intelligently about human liberty, or human liberation, without reference or regard to the ends for the sake of which the liberty itself is desired. The mindlessness of Smith’s examples is incomprehensible. No one of ordinary common sense would be deceived by them. Here we are confronted with a trained incapacity to think that is perhaps possible only as a result of a doctorate in philosophy from Harvard. Remembering William F. Buckley, Jr.’s famed aphorism, that it would be better to be governed by the first 200 names in the Boston telephone directory than by the Harvard faculty, one wonders whether it is not just as true that it would be better to be instructed in philosophy by any of these same 200. On the ambiguity of freedom or liberation, apart from the motives of those laying claim to it, we may very profitably contemplate these reflections of Abraham Lincoln, in the midst of the Civil War.

The world has never had a good definition of the word liberty, and the American people just now [April 1864] are much in want of one. We all declare for liberty; but in using the same word we do not all mean the same thing. With some the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself, and the product of his labor; while with others the word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men's labor. Here are two, not only different, but incompatible things, called by the same name —liberty. . . . The shepherd drives the wolf from the sheep's throat, for which the sheep thanks the shepherd as a liberator, while the wolf denounces him for the same act as the destroyer of liberty, especially as the sheep was a black one. Plainly, the sheep and the wolf are not agreed upon a definition of the word liberty. . . .

Smith seems incapable of distinguishing the sheep’s from the wolf’s definition of liberty or liberation.

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Smith refers to a third form of unfreedom as follows.

... since we have a memory for aversive outcomes and can form behavioral habits [sic], we may internalize the external threat and come to govern ourselves by it, even when the threat is not apparent: "I know it's ok, but I'm still afraid to say how I really feel"; "I could never wear that in public."

Once again, Smith abstracts from the external threat and the outcome that the threat averts. If, every time a wolf attacks a sheep, he is beaten by a shepherd, perhaps he will stop molesting sheep. And if, instead of a vulpine sheep molester, we have a human child molester, we can hardly regret the internalization of the external threat, or regard it as a form of unfreedom. Smith says that there is something he knows is ok, but is still afraid to say. But how can anyone properly say that this constitutes unfreedom without first passing judgment upon what it is that he wishes to say? That Smith believes it is ok does not make it ok. Is it ok to falsely shout "Fire" in a crowded theater? How ok is it to speak in support of William Shockley's theories about the genetic inferiority of welfare recipients? How ok is it to speak in support of the authenticity of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion? Or to deny that the Holocaust ever took place? I am confident that Smith himself does not think these things are ok, but he must know that there are others who do think so.

Smith regards as unfreedom the internalization of customs that dictate what we wear. But is this not silly? One would not expect President Reagan to dress for his inauguration the way President Washington dressed for his. But Mr. Reagan does not think the worse of George Washington for having followed the custom of his day. To call such things "inhibitions" and declare them to be forms of unfreedom is preposterous. Are we inhibited in being obliged to observe the rules of the road? Or to refrain from drinking while driving?

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We come to the fourth and final form of unfreedom described by Smith. This is

the experience of aversive outcomes which may condition us so thoroughly that we suppress or deny our inner life and become literally unaware of those impulses in us that have led to unpleasant results in the past: "I'm not angry!"; "I have just no interest in sex." When self-restraint and inhibition have become so complete ... unfreedom may be called simply self-denial.

But how does Smith know that self-denial—in these or in any other instances—is a form of unfreedom? Both Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther

King, Jr., believed that the theory and practice of non-violent resistance required the elimination of anger towards the oppressor. And both of them regarded non-violence as a liberating doctrine. Gandhi also believed in the suppression, or sublimation, of the sexual impulses. His belief in this respect was similar to, although not identical with, that of St. Paul who, in *I Corinthians*, praises celibacy as a higher state than matrimony. While I myself agree neither with Gandhi nor with Paul, I would never refer to them as inhibited men. Right or wrong, their powerful convictions were an expression of their freedom, not of servitude.

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Smith concedes that inhibitions—or, more generally, restraints upon the spontaneity of the self—are not always to be characterized negatively or pejoratively. Nevertheless, they are all, in the precise sense, forms of unfreedom in his way of thinking.

It is worth noting [he writes] that despite their pejorative associations, these phenomena of unfreedom are not always inappropriate or wrong. The world is not wholly malleable to our wills, and may often be objectively threatening; thus in order to survive and flourish, we must develop a complete system of self-control and self-restraint. Inhibition is appropriate in the presence of a sleeping tiger—or a menacing street gang.

Smith does not say, or admit in any way, that anything is wrong in itself. He says that some things are “inappropriate or wrong.” But the “or” is only an alternative expression for what is meant as “inappropriate.” Nothing would be wrong, from his perspective, were it not for the fact that “the world is not wholly malleable to our wills.” In Smith’s universe, there are no moral commandments that are categorical, either in the Mosaic (“Thou shalt not . . .”) or in the Kantian sense (“Act so that the maxim of your will may be a universal law . . .”). For Smith, nothing is good in itself unless it is the uninhibited spontaneity of the integrated self. What is called “wrong” is merely what is inopportunist, because it invites the retaliation of someone who may be stronger than you are.

Smith speaks of the prudence properly elicited by “a sleeping tiger” and by “a menacing street gang.” But what about the tiger and the gang? Should they be denied their freedom? Smith tacitly identifies himself with the potential victims; but suppose he represented the strong, instead of the weak, in these examples. What principle would deny him his prey? Would not his “uninhibited spontaneity” properly fulfill itself in a murderous assault? If we recall Lincoln’s analogy of the sheep and the wolf, we must ask why we should—if we are shepherds—prefer the freedom of the sheep to that of the wolf? Since Smith recognizes only “selves,” there is no ground upon which to prefer one self to